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ABSTRACT

Although administrators cannot totally eliminate stress in the schools, they can reduce excessive stress that results in an unfavorable and often damaging climate. One method for doing this is to create an atmosphere of calm and order. Such an atmosphere results from defining and formulating objectives, converting those objectives into action, improving staff perception and communication, and continuously evaluating progress. One vehicle for accomplishing these goals is the "teacher letter," an instrument that allows staff members to study, plan, and evaluate their own professional responsibilities and progress. Very important is improving communication through avoiding unclear and unexpected messages. Other administrative approaches to stress reduction involve maintaining high expectations of staff, good listening techniques, and a systematic and constructive evaluative feedback system. (Author/JM)

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REDUCING STRESS IN CLASSROOM TEACHERS: AN ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

Dr. John N. Bruscemi

There are a number of factors which can cause the American administrator to experience stress. A perusal of the daily newspapers can attest to the fact that school officials are continuously "under the gun" so to speak. Taxpayers, for example, perennially complain that the schools are too costly. Busing and desegregation are problems in certain areas. The truancy rate is on the increase. Drug abuse plagues school officials. Discipline is still hamstringing the educational process.

With respect to curricular matters, the public wants to know why such a high percentage of students read and calculate at rates which are unacceptable for society and the world of work. Therefore, the public continues to pressure that some sort of system be developed to hold educators accountable for what they do and to send business and the professional communities a better product.

The schools are "hotbeds of stress" for still other reasons. Administrators, for example, are faced with declining enrollments. Salaries are not keeping up with mounting inflation. Teacher strikes and student militancy are commonplace. Even insufficient fuel supplies have impacted the schools.

Pressure elements such as those mentioned are too numerous to enumerate within the limits of this article. There is no question, however, that such forces can have subtle, yet serious effects on a school. They could contribute to a tense school climate. They could cause a staff to be less than productive. They could even be the underlying currents for an administration and faculty to lose sight of its overall purpose and thrust.

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It would be unrealistic for an administrator to embark upon a program to totally eliminate stress. Certain types of stress will always be present in a school and result from its day-to-day operation. Some authorities such as Hans Selye, the president of the International Institute of Stress, feels that some stress is needed and healthy. It gives "spice to life, for any emotion, any activity can cause stress."[1] However, administrators should be mindful that excessive stress which is allowed to start and continue can result in an unfavorable and often damaging atmosphere. Therefore, they need to take steps to develop a system which will prevent such an occurrence and which will cultivate a climate which is orderly and calm, thereby reducing stress among staff members.

An Atmosphere of Orderliness and Calm

How do administrators go about the business of creating an atmosphere of orderliness and calm and reduce stress? One method to consider is to carefully and systematically develop a management system in which they

. . . define and formulate objectives,

. . . convert those objectives into action,

. . . develop staff perception and communication,

. . . continuously evaluate and reconstruct their progress and that of the staff.

With respect to goals and objectives, the author recommends that administrators zero in and give direction to the important purposes and functions of the school. An example of an objective to consider might include the development and implementation of the processes needed to mainstream a handicapped student. Once goals and objectives have been identified and developed, a vehicle should be

designed to assure that the teaching staff has an accurate perception of those goals and is committed to them. In addition, it should afford the staff the opportunity of developing goals for their own professional advancement and which, in turn, will support major school goals.

The Teacher Letter

One vehicle which the author recommends to assist teachers to develop a perception of administrative goals and thereby to develop their own is the "teacher letter." That document is very similar to a system proposed by Peter F. Drucker in Management--Tasks, Responsibilities and Practices. Basically it is an instrument which allows individual staff members to study, plan, and evaluate their professional responsibilities and progress.

The "teacher letter" is useful for a number of reasons. It gives teachers the opportunity to define in writing the administrator's objectives. It affords them the chance to formulate and set down their own goals and objectives. It could also be a medium enumerating the materials and methods needed to attain objectives. In addition, it could be a way to point out those elements which were helpful to the teaching process and those which were major obstacles. It could even serve as a proposal to the administration for future plans and objectives.[2]

A significant section of the "teacher letter" is that in which teachers outline what they propose to do during the next year to reach the goals and objectives they have set down. If the principal accepts that document, then the "teacher letter" can become a set of goals and objectives for teachers and their respective departments if the letters were submitted conjointly by and for a department.

The interesting and important point about the "teacher letter" is that it helps to clear the air, and clear up any unconsidered remarks or ideas. It also brings out any inconsistencies there might be in the goals, objectives, and directions made by an administrator.[3]

Good perception and communication techniques are crucial for the overall functioning of an administrative plan and scheme of things. In contrast, where there is conflict of perception between the administration and the teaching staff, a number of problems can take place. A conflict of perception could, for example, cause a major change in the system. Conflicts could be interpreted as a reason to reorganize and adopt a new operational method. In contrast, a system in which there is sensitivity to the sources of conflict will provide the administration with the means for diagnosing any malfunctions in the system. Such sensitivity will also provide the administration with the means to detect the clues which will help it intervene and improve the system.

Conflicts in Perception

Conflicts in perception can result from circumstances in which the elements of a conflicting situation are not necessarily obvious--although the parties in conflict both are looking at reality. The problem is that each person is looking at reality from his/her own perspective and from a different aspect. What principals see so vividly, might not be seen by a member or members of their teaching staff at all. Therefore, when principals are making a point either during a staff meeting, or via a school memo, it is possible that those points may have no pertinence to their staff members. A teaching staff may have an

entirely different perception of the principal's expectations, goals, and objectives unless the principal makes a point of defining and explaining those expectations. The significant point is that each member of the teaching staff will perceive what he/she expects to perceive. Each teacher will see what he/she expects to see, and for the most part, to hear what he/she expects to hear.

Poorly defined and unexpected communication can cause teachers serious perception problems. Such items could be resented. It is possible that they might not be received. They could be misunderstood. In some cases they are ignored.[4]

The administration which periodically informed its staff that it was planning to change class time for the subsequent school year from a fifty-five minute, six period a day to a two-hour rotating block schedule is an excellent example of a serious communication problem. Although the administration carefully planned and developed the system with select department chairpersons, it failed to involve the total staff. Consequently, many teachers planned their curriculum and daily lesson plans to fit the traditional program. They even scheduled films, guest speakers, and panelists to accommodate the old system. Ultimately they experienced excessive stress and developed resentment toward that administrative staff.

Additional Administrative Approaches

What additional approaches can administrators take to develop good perception techniques and an effective communication system? First, they could be visible and interact often with the teaching staff. Secondly, administrators

should be positive and approach staff members with the staff's strengths in mind. They should assume that the staff wants to achieve, is strong, responsible, and wants to contribute. In contrast, administrators who think that their teachers are incompetent and nonproductive probably will get incompetency and non-productivity in return.

Another suggestion is that administrators be active listeners. They need to focus on the individual as he/she is speaking and tune themselves out. They might ask, "What is Mrs. Jones <u>really</u> saying? What does Joe Doakes <u>really</u> mean?" They could even seek clarification by asking, "Can I assume that you mean such and such?"

Finally, the author strongly recommends that an administrator develop a systematic and constructive evaluative feedback system to help the staff assess its performance as it progresses through the school year. The most effective method is one in which administrators share their perception of each individual staff member's performance in as professional a manner and setting as possible, but preferably on a face-to-face basis.[5]

The management techniques outlined in this article are basically an introduction. Other methods can be cited and should be explored. It really is up to each administrator to determine which strategies will support and foster an orderly, calm climate, and reduce stress in his/her school. If this article has succeeded in stimulating such an awareness and thoughts about the reduction of stress, then the author's purpose has been reached.

Footnotes

1. Hans Selye, The Stress of Life (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), p. VII.

2. Peter F. Drucker, Management--Tasks, Responsibilities, and Practices (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 439.

3. Ibid., pp. 438,439.

4. Ibid., pp. 485.

5. Jacob W. Getzels, James M. Lipham, and Roald F. Campbell, Educational Administration As A Social Process (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 329.

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